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### **Underground in the Second City: Aardvark Cinematheque and the Magic Lantern Society**

The following paper is an introductory investigation into the history of two short-lived Chicago underground film series—The Aardvark Cinematheque and the Magic Lantern Society—and their divergent fates. Both began screening experimental and underground films at the height of the underground's popularity in the mid-sixties only to abandon this fare by the early 1970s—the Aardvark switching to pornography in 1970 and the Magic Lantern Society to NEA-sponsored art house and repertory in 1972.

These divergent paths—into the low-brow sleaze-world of pornography and the high-brow field of government-funded cultural programming—mark the aesthetic and cultural poles of the sixties underground itself. At the time, the underground attempted to define itself in opposition to mainstream culture while at the same time seeking acceptance from its cultural institutions. The Aardvark Cinematheque and the Magic Lantern Series positioned themselves along these two approaches, defining themselves against the specific cultural appeals of the other. This paper attempts to investigate the reasons for the kinds of rhetoric each series employed and the stakes each had in challenging or accepting mainstream notions of good taste.

Additionally, this paper is an attempt to grapple with the venues for the underground—often overlooked in histories of the avant-garde. Indeed, there are very few histories of exhibition spaces for experimental, avant-garde, or underground film. The few that exist include Scott McDonald's examination of Amos Vogel's famed Cinema 16, J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum's recollection of sixties underground Manhattan in *Midnight Movies*, David James' book on Jonas Mekas and his role in the creation and exhibition of the New American Cinema, and a smattering of articles on various non-profit spaces. Nevertheless, the work is important because it provides another way of examining the history and meaning of avant-garde and experimental film. Exhibition spaces often shape the way audiences interpret work—a venue's architecture,

programming, advertising, and community appeals help audiences interpret the works they see on screen as art, scandal, or entertainment—and studying these spaces provides insight into the way audiences may have understood these films. An examination of the venues for underground and experimental film provides a greater sense of who saw these kinds of films, what they meant to the public at large, and how they functioned culturally.

### The Aardvark Cinematheque

The founders of the Aardvark Cinematheque thumbed their noses at mainstream culture from the start. Paul Gonsky and Jeff Begun met while attending Roosevelt University in the early sixties, where the two collaborated on a quarterly humor magazine called *Aardvark*. Satiric and abrasive, the magazine featured a mix of underground cartooning, interviews with noted comedians, and editorials on popular culture, politics, and college life. The result proved to be too unruly for the university. According to Jay Lynch, noted comic book artist and Roosevelt alum, "when the administration saw the first issue, they took away any official sanction of the mag, and forced [them] to publish off-campus." Pushed underground, the two refined their counter-cultural sensibilities, bringing out twelve more issues and garnering a cult following for their magazine in the process.<sup>1</sup>

After graduation, Begun and Gonsky's interests turned from publishing to filmmaking. Inspired by the underground performance and film scene in New York, Begun returned to Chicago with plans to make and screen his own work. With the help of Gonsky, he threw a benefit at the Old Town club and boho hangout, Poor Richard's, to raise funds.<sup>2</sup> The two did not expect much of an audience for their underground show, but drew a packed house. The success of the event convinced them to put on a weekly program of similar fare. Drawing on their comic connections, they rented space from Second City on Monday nights and screened experimental films to "mixed crowds," calling the series Aardvark Cinema after their humor rag.<sup>3</sup> "Chicagoans who like their kicks cinematic support the screenings of the Aardvark Cinematheque" noted Arthur Knight in a *Playboy* article on the history of experimental filmmaking, "an organization of

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Weinman, *The Shel Silverstein Archive* (DATE?)

<http://shelsilverstein.tripod.com/aardvark.html>, and Jay Lynch, *Top Shelf Productions*, (DATE?), <http://www.topshelfcomix.com/comix.php?artist=250>

<sup>2</sup> Located at 1363 N. Sedgewick in an old church in Old Town, the club featured appearances by groups as varied as the Velvet Underground and The Paul Butterfield Blues Band.

<sup>3</sup> John Conroy, "Who Killed Paul Gonsky? A Murder Mystery—Now In Its Third Year," *The Chicago Reader* (3 November 3, 1978): 11. Second City was then located at 1846 N. Wells, also in Old Town.

underground enthusiasts that has successfully invaded the premises of Second City, a satiric cabaret theater, on Monday nights.”<sup>4</sup>

Begun and Gonsky’s success was due in part to the success of Andy Warhol’s *Chelsea Girls*. In the fall of 1966, Warhol’s film crossed-over from Manhattan lofts and late night underground screenings into commercial theaters, greatly publicizing the underground along the way. Fueled by Warhol’s art-star persona, the film broke the underground filmmaking into mainstream consciousness. *Newsweek* hailed *Chelsea Girls* as the “*Iliad* of the underground,” and *Variety* kept a record of the film’s grosses. According to Hoberman and Rosenbaum, *Chelsea Girls* screened continuously for nine months in theatres all over Manhattan, ran commercially in theaters all over the United States, and was invited to Cannes.<sup>5</sup> By the end of the year, nearly every magazine in the country—including the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Playboy* had written some article on the film and its cinematic brethren.<sup>6</sup>

A series of vignettes featuring Warhol’s boho “superstars,” the film offered a glimpse into New York’s underground—brimming with prostitutes, transvestites, speed, heroin, rock stars, sexual innuendo, performance artists, and fallen society girls. Indeed, part of the popular appeal of underground films was their relationship to the counter-culture. “It’s what’s happening, baby,” explained Knight in *Playboy*. Appealing to his readers’ particular cultural pretensions, Knight depicted underground film as an essential component of the fashionable *Playboy* lifestyle. “The underground is rising to the surface and an impressively large audience is beginning to catch up with the avant-garde. Today, for anyone with intellectual pretensions who wants to be ‘with it,’ who feels he has to ‘make the scene,’ some acquaintance with the work of the New American Cinema is an absolute must.”<sup>7</sup>

For the popular press, underground filmmaking often appeared to be the aesthetic manifestation of counter cultural lifestyle and politics. As David James points out, the press often linked these films to the “new bohemia,” and youthful counter-culture, “stressing the coincidence of formal infractions of orthodox film grammar and parallel moral and social transgressions, [and] interpreting the latter as evidence of the filmmakers’ degeneracy and their social criticism.”<sup>8</sup> In his 1967 “handbook” to underground filmmaking, Shelden Renan described the films as

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Knight and Hollis Alpert, “The History of Sex in Cinema: Part XIV, Experimental Films,” *Playboy* (April 1967): 133.

<sup>5</sup> J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1983): 72-3.

<sup>6</sup> Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 70 and David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989): 95-97.

<sup>7</sup> Knight and Alpert, 133.

<sup>8</sup> James, 95 (note 7).

developing out of “the climate of the new man.” “The new man and the underground film developed together,” he emphasized,

The climate of the new man, in which to be new is to be desirable, in which the individual is constantly re-forming his idea of the world, in which the personal point of view is all important, was one of the factors that produced the underground film. The underground film, with its conscious dissent from the standards and approaches of the commercial film, is the film equivalent of the new man and his dissent from society.<sup>9</sup>

John Gruen’s 1966 art exposé of Manhattan’s lower east side, *The New Bohemia*, argued that “of all avant-garde manifestations in the New Bohemia, the underground film movement, for all its deliberated derangement, is the most active and the most daring...the fluidity of the medium seems to have acted as an inspirational drug on a host of young experimenters. To them, celluloid is the magic talisman that can forever hold images and ideas of mescalinean proportions.”<sup>10</sup> Filmmakers themselves linked their work to a political and cultural underground. Stan Van Der Beek’s 1961 manifesto “The Cinema Delimina: Film from the Underground,” claimed that anyone who made films that differed from “the entertainment merchants, stars, manufacturers...must work as if they were secret members of the underground,” conjuring up images of cinematic guerillas hard at work on their latest celluloid bomb.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in a 1963 *Village Voice* interview, avant-garde filmmaker and critic, Jonas Mekas argued that the “real revolution in cinema today” was taking place in films that had “appeared from the underground.”<sup>12</sup>

While these works blatantly reworked the aesthetic conventions of mainstream media, Gruen noted that many also positioned themselves as deliberate confrontations to “square” culture. Quoting a description for a film by Ed Sanders, the “potentate of the ‘pornies,’” Gruen emphasized Sanders’ efforts to insult both mainstream and high art sensibilities:

The Editorial Board of *Fuck You/a magazine of the arts* announces its first moviemaking venture: MONGOLIAN CLUSTER FUCK, a short but searing non-socially redeeming porn flick featuring 100's of the lower east side's finest, with musical background by Algernon Charles Swinburne & THE FUGS!!<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1967): 46.

<sup>10</sup> John Gruen, *The New Bohemia: The Combine Generation* (New York: Shorecrest, Inc., 1966): 93.

<sup>11</sup> Stan Van Der Beek, “The Cinema Delimina,” *Film Quarterly* (Summer 1961): 8.

<sup>12</sup> Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Collier, 1972): 85.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Gruen, 98.

By proclaiming his film's complete lack of "socially redeeming qualities," Sanders deliberately casts it outside the realm of high culture and good taste, seemingly daring the powers-that-be with its existence.

Begun and Gonsky aligned themselves with this same confrontational attitude. Building on the outsider role they had developed while publishing their magazine, Begun and Gonsky attempted to create a screening series that was at once a hub of underground activity and provocative to mainstream sensibilities. They championed and aligned themselves with the milieu if new bohemia—and its associated titillations—importing works from New York and screening films from Chicago's own underground. At the time, Chicago's "movie underground" consisted of "about a dozen active filmmakers, and perhaps a thousand interested fans," as described by the University of Chicago's *Chicago Maroon*. "The filmmakers ranged from "Hyde Park to the near north side, and in film subjects from State Street burlesque to the Bryn Mawr 'L' Station. An industrious group of young men, they work or study on a full-time basis, making films whenever the time, inspiration, and especially money permits."<sup>14</sup> According to local filmmaker Tom Palazzolo, many of these filmmakers got their start at the Illinois Institute of Art, which had introduced filmmaking to their photography program, and the School of the Art Institute, which had hired its first film instructor in the mid-sixties.<sup>15</sup> And, they were extremely supportive of Aardvark's screenings. Palazzolo recalls that, in these early years, "the films were so popular they would have three showings a night."<sup>16</sup>

In 1967, when Second City decided to move into a larger space up the block, they asked Begun and Gonsky if they wanted to build their own theater there. The comedy troupe had long been interested in independent and underground films. They had run Sunday morning and Monday night film series in the early sixties and were making plans to produce their own films, drawing on the talent of local filmmakers.<sup>17</sup> Second City offered to split the investment three ways—one third held by Second City, one third by a group of ten outside investors, and one third by Begun and Gonsky. A bare-bones auditorium, or as Roger Ebert called, an "Old

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<sup>14</sup> Robert S. Hertz, "The Underground Film Scene in Chicago," *Chicago Maroon Magazine* (4 March 1966): PAGE?

<sup>15</sup> Tom Palazzolo, interview with author (13 March 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Tom Palazzolo, quoted in Jack Helbig, "Tom Palazzolo's Life in Pictures," *Chicago Reader* (24 September 1999), Section 1, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Sheldon Patinkin and Robert Klein, *The Second City: Backstage at the World's Greatest Comedy Theater* (Chicago: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2000): 61. At the time, Second City Productions had partnered with Bell and Howell to produce a dozen feature films in Chicago, using the old Essanay complex on Argyle street and featuring Second City cast members and directors. Robert Goldsborough, "The Mecca and the Media," *Chicago Magazine* (Spring 1968): 67.

Town loft,” the new theater sat nearly 200 and was renamed the Aardvark Cinematheque.<sup>18</sup>

With the move, the Aardvark transformed from a weekly series into a movie theater with paid employees, union projectionists, and financial responsibilities to investors. The duo continued to screen underground films, shoring up local support for their venture by starting up a library of films by local filmmakers. According to Chicago filmmaker Allen Ross, makers hoped that by showing their works in a “not-so-underground” theater, their efforts would be legitimated and even make a little money.<sup>19</sup> Under pressure to bring more money into their venture, Begun and Gonsky also attempted to bring a larger audience to the Aardvark. Playing upon the Cinematheque’s identity as an underground theater, the two augmented film screenings by booking bands and performances. Notably, The Velvet Underground (with Warhol films) played the Aardvark as part of their White Light/White Heat tour in 1968. Begun and Gonsky also expanded their programming from a straight slate of underground and experimental films to include a mix of road show, art house, feature-length documentaries and underground cross-overs like Morrissey and Warhol’s *Flesh* and *Lonesome Cowboys*.<sup>20</sup> In October and November of 1967, they screened everything from Ingmar Bergman’s *The Magician*, Lenny Bruce’s *Performance Film*, Chicago documentary *Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, Godard’s *Masculine Feminine*, Emmett Flynn’s 1926 silent *The Palace of Pleasure*, and a several programs of underground shorts. One audience member remembers that before each screening, the house manager would announce: “The smoking of ANYTHING in this theatre is illegal.” This always got laughs, since the neighborhood (Old Town) was a magnet for young people—hippies, longhairs, and various radicals.”<sup>21</sup> The audience appreciated such titillation and the films’

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<sup>18</sup> Roger Ebert, “Why Those Films Don’t Get Here,” *Chicago-Sun Times* (14 January 1968): PAGE?

<sup>19</sup> Eventually, the Aardvark could no longer cover filmmakers’ rental fees, prompting the filmmakers to start their own distribution collective called the Center Cinema Collective. Allen Ross, “Filmgroup at N.A.M.E. Gallery 1973-1977,” unpublished manuscript, n.p.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with author, March 13, 2002. In addition to programs of short films by local and national filmmakers, the Aardvark presented *The Magician* (Ingmar Bergman, 1958), *Lenny Bruce: Performance Film* (John Magnuson, 1967), *Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable* (Ron Nameth, 1967), *Corruption of the Damned* (George Kuchar, 1965), *Dames* (Busby Berkeley & Ray Enright, 1934), *The Palace of Pleasure* (Emmett Flynn, 1926?), *Masculine Feminine* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1966) in 1967; *You Are What You Eat* (Barry Feinstein, 1968), *Titticut Follies* (Frederick Wiseman, 1967), *Carnival in Flanders* (Jacques Feyder, 1936), *Bizarre Bizarre* (Marcel Carne, 1937), and *Finnegan’s Wake* (Mary Ellen Bute, 1966) in 1968; *Warrendale* (Allen King, 1967) and *Flesh* (Andy Warhol & Paul Morrissey, 1968) in 1969; *Feast of Friends* (Paul Ferrara, 1970) in 1970.

<sup>21</sup> KenC, “Comments, Aardvark Cinematheque,” Cinema Treasures (27 December 2004): <http://cinematreasures.org/theater/8584/>

association with underground culture. “The audience that the New American Cinema is building today,” noted Knight and Alpert, exists in the main outside normal commercial distribution channels.”

They are to be found in the late, late shows of permissive art houses in the larger cities, the new 16mm cinematheques that keep springing up, but even more in the on-campus film societies of most American colleges and universities. This is an audience that cares passionately enough about the newness, the contemporaneity of the ideas expressed—in which it sees, often, a reflection of its own concerns—that it is willing to accept not only a crudeness of technique but a total lack of it.”<sup>22</sup>

In their advertising, Aardvark often traded on the potentially risqué nature of underground filmmaking—emphasizing the “adult” nature of their programming. Art house theaters had long practiced this kind of advertising. As Barbara Wilinsky and Douglas Gomery, have pointed out, because they were in competition for the same entertainment dollar, art houses needed to emphasize the difference of their product from mainstream film. Accordingly, they often showcased the erotic or “adult” subject matter of their films in their advertising—both the sophisticated anomie of modern (European) romance and its sexually charged imagery. In his 1968 study of censorship in the movies, Richard S. Randall reasoned that, “though the art film does not inherently press against the limits of acceptability as does the exploitation film, its potential for becoming a source of censorship of one kind or another remains. ‘Artistic sovereignty,’ taken seriously by many art film proprietors, is an uneasy companion to self-restraint, if in fact the two elements can coexist at all.”<sup>23</sup> Throughout the fifties, distributor David Friedman observed, “there were two markets for “candid” films: one for the select, sophisticated white-wine and canapés crowd, the other, and much larger one, for the less discriminating, cold-beer-and-grease-burger gang. As diverse as these two audiences were, both were intent, oddly enough, on viewing pictures in which human female epidermis was exposed.”<sup>24</sup> In an essay on the advertising materials for art films, Mark Betz describes the U.S. pressbook for *The Bicycle Thief*, “a film that would seem to provide considerably less possibility for sexually charged exploitation,” as “uniformly synecdoche by the bare leg of a woman astride a bicycle being whisked off her feet by a male rider whose fedora has just

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<sup>22</sup> Knight and Alpert, 212.

<sup>23</sup> Richard S. Randall, *Censorship of the Movies: the Social and Political Control of a Mass Medium* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1968): 219, quoted in Eric Schaeffer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999): 336.

<sup>24</sup> David Friedman & Don De Nevi, *A Youth in Babylon: Confessions of a Trash-Film King* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990): 100, quoted in Schaefer, 335-336.

blown off his head.”<sup>25</sup> As foreign film importer Arthur Mayer remembers, “*The Bicycle Thief* was completely devoid of any erotic embellishments, but exhibitors sought to atone for this deficiency with a highly imaginative sketch of a young lady riding a bicycle. This was not good, or bad, enough, and in spite of the critic’s rave reviews it did far less business than [*Open City* or *Paisan*]” which had enjoyed much more erotic advertising.<sup>26</sup> Building on the tropes established in earlier campaigns, ads for French and Italian films in the sixties explicitly referred to their status as national products, “thereby stating,” Betz emphasizes, “their potential raciness.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, building on the reputation of Bergman’s *Virgin Spring*—which had been recut and distributed as an exploitation film in the United States—and *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, by the end of the sixties, ads for “Swedish films” often functioned as code for sexually-explicit content.

While Aardvark’s ads rarely contained images, their typeface and taglines emphasized the cinematheque’s relationship to both the counter-culture and cinematic sexual revolution. Aardvark’s banner was drawn up in hand-lettered balloon letters reminiscent of psychedelic sixties album covers and underground handbills. An October 1967 advertisement for Lenny Bruce’s *Performance Film* was paired with a program of short films billed “Eros ‘67” and the line “Underground Looks at Love.” Surrounding ads for the popular European films *I, a Woman* and *Galia*, highlighted their potentially erotic content with taglines announcing the films were “for adults only” and even promising “second surprise adult hit.”<sup>28</sup> Taking their cue from their surrounding art and grind house competition, Aardvark billed later advertisements for Chicago-filmmaker Ron Nameth’s *Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable* and Godard’s *Masculine/Feminine* as “adults only,” highlighting their status as fashionably risqué films to readers who might not be in the know.<sup>29</sup>

While Aardvark attempted to exploit the scandalous nature of their fare for its market potential, their advertisements also drew attention from the Chicago censor boards. The theater repeatedly battled police raids and censorship attempts. According to Bill Stamets, they were cited seven times in one week during 1967 for screening films originally deemed obscene by the Chicago Police Censor Board.<sup>30</sup> Gonsky, Begun, and Aardvark staff were repeatedly hauled into central

<sup>25</sup> Mark Betz, “Art, Exploitation, Underground,” *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer, and Andy Willis, eds. (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 206.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Mayer, *Merely Colossal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953): 233-4, quoted in Schaefer, 334-5.

<sup>27</sup> Betz, 212.

<sup>28</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, (27 October 1967): Section 1, 25

<sup>29</sup> *Chicago Tribune* (10 November 1967): Section 2, 18, and *Chicago Tribune* (16 November 1967): Section 2, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Stamets, unpublished manuscript, n.p.

booking for screening obscene work. Aardvark house manager and eventual porn kingpin Steven Touchin recalls that his first arrest was for Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*.<sup>31</sup> While Aardvark attempted to reap profits showcasing scandalous work, they also faced severe financial consequences through fines and loss of potential revenue. However, these encounters with police and the city's institutions of decency solidified the theater's "underground" status and reinforced its identity as site confrontational to mainstream culture.

### The Magic Lantern Society

While Aardvark courted scandal, the Magic Lantern Society played down the controversial aspects of underground film. Founded by the advertising and design association Society of Typographic Arts, the series began to screen experimental and underground fare when STA member Camille Cook took over in the mid-sixties. She had become interested in experimental film while working as a graphic designer and decided to turn her membership to the Society into a means for screening them. "[I] felt sure that the future in communications was in film and television," she said in a 1975 interview, "I was reading a lot about film, and was frustrated that nowhere in Chicago could I see these films."<sup>32</sup> The series screened throughout the city—Columbia College, the Tribune Tower, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

The association was meant to expose the advertisers to new developments in media culture—television, film, art, and international design—and members attended Cook's series see the latest international and domestic films. "The people who were in charge of [the Magic Lantern Society], who attended it, were mostly graphic designers," Cook recalls.<sup>33</sup> Her decision to screen work from the youthful underground was in keeping with the Society's mandates. As noted by many historians, commercial culture had begun to pay attention to the pocket books of youth culture at the end of the fifties and throughout the sixties. The demographics for numerous entertainments—especially the movies—shifted ever younger through these decades. According to Paul Monaco, adolescents and young adults who had been raised in the American suburbs of the late 1950s and early 1960s "favored eclectic and slightly rebellious films...populated with characters whose screen presence invariably expressed some measure of alienation and existential angst."<sup>34</sup> Commenting on this phenomenon in 1961, *Variety* reported that "the sicko ones are making for box office health more readily than the

<sup>31</sup> Steven Toushin, "Bijou Chronicles," *StevenToushin.com*, [DATE?], <http://www.steventoushin.com/bio.html>

<sup>32</sup> Camille Cook, quoted in Les Bridges, "Chicago Movie Heroes: Camille Cook," *Chicago Magazine* (October / November 1975), 187.

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Z. McGavin, "Gene's Analysis: What's Behind the Film Center's Name Change," *Chicago Reader* (July 14, 2000): [http://www.chicagoreader.com/hottype/2000/000714\\_1.html](http://www.chicagoreader.com/hottype/2000/000714_1.html)

<sup>34</sup> Paul Monaco, *The Sixties: 1960 – 1969* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001): 45.

happier movies.”<sup>35</sup> By the end of the decade, the popularity of studio-financed films like *Hard Days Night*, *Head*, and later, *Easy Rider* and *Midnight Cowboy* demonstrated the influence of youth and counter-culture on mainstream media. Accordingly, many advertisers (and commercial filmmakers) looked to the underground for insights into youth culture, using them for tonal and aesthetic inspiration. Allen Aarkesh notes that many Hollywood editors were equally influenced by the kind of cutting engendered by television and the films of Bruce Conner and Kenneth Anger.<sup>36</sup>

Because of the series’ association with commercial and institutionalized culture, some filmmakers were suspicious of Cook and the Society’s motives. Many local filmmakers believed the Typographic Society was only screening underground fare for ideas. “More and more of the best TV commercials today include ideas stolen from films being made by college students and other young experimenters,” complained Chicago International Film Festival founder Michael Kutza in 1967.<sup>37</sup> “They were the advertising crowd,” echoed local filmmaker John Heinz in a recent interview, “their motives were suspect.”<sup>38</sup> Additionally, Cook herself was “outside” the underground, comfortably middle-class with a house in the southwest suburbs and an investment-banker husband.<sup>39</sup> Local filmmakers often felt “out-of-place” among her crowd.<sup>40</sup>

But Cook was not interested in creating the kind of underground scene Gonsky and Begun were attempting to establish. Because her endeavor depended on the financial and physical resources of institutions associated with mainstream culture and high art—the Typographic Society, the *Chicago Tribune*, the Chicago Art Institute, Columbia College, and the Museum of Contemporary Art—Cook needed to emphasize the series’ seriousness. Indeed, she was often forced to work around the reputation of underground films. At one of her very first screenings, the president of the STA welcomed the audience with a wink. “I think I know the reason for this big turnout tonight,” he said. “You’re all hoping to see some stag movies.” According to the *Chicago Tribune* reporter, Clifford Terry, the audience

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<sup>35</sup> *Variety*, (26 April 1961): 1, quoted in Monaco, 44.

<sup>36</sup> Allan Arkush, “I Want My KEM-TV,” *American Film* (December 1985): 65-6, quoted in Monaco, 87. Ironically, many of these underground films were reworking and satirizing popular media itself. For example George and Mike Kuchar’s films amp up the histrionics of melodrama and soap opera, often adding horror or science fiction subplots, and plenty of overblown violence.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Kutza, [TITLE?] Clifford Terry (31 October 1967):

<sup>38</sup> John Heniz, interview with Bill Stamets, (August 1995), quoted in Stamets, n.p.

<sup>39</sup> Bridges, 187.

<sup>40</sup> Helbig, 31. Filmmaker and Palazzolo collaborator Jeff Kreines describes attending a party for the filmmaker Robert Nelson at Cook’s suburban home and feeling “out of place” among all the “adults” in attendance.

responded with nervous laughter, as they “waited in anticipation, half believing.”<sup>41</sup> The series was actually kicked out of their Tribune Tower venue when one of the projectionists complained to the powers-that-be after screening a film in which the Hindenburg disaster was superimposed onto the belly of a pregnant woman.<sup>42</sup> To counter this kind of reaction, Cook attempted to separate her series from the chaotic immorality associated with the underground, emphasizing instead the professionalism of her enterprise. While Gonsky and Begun played up the scandalous nature of the underground in order to create and capitalize on a counter-cultural reputation for the Aardvark, Cook repeatedly highlighted the Magic Lantern Series’ association with the professional class and established institutions of culture. Searching for a new home at the fledgling Museum of Contemporary Art, she attempted to clarify the series’ approach to the work screened. “You know we take pains to put on a professional show and prepare program notes,” she wrote the MCA. “You wouldn’t have to apologize for us.”<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, while Aardvark played upon the underground’s oppositional and counter-cultural relationship to mainstream culture, Cook built her series on efforts to cast these same works within the realm of art. One of her earliest programs consisted entirely of work by makers who had received “creative filmmaking” grants from the Ford Foundation. While some underground makers sniffed at the Foundation’s money—Ken Jacobs reportedly announced that “anyone safe enough to get a Ford grant ought to be working in Hollywood anyway”—Cook found that the Foundation provided her with culturally-redeeming safety of art.<sup>44</sup> Cook also drew on the work of Jonas Mekas, Susan Sontag, and other critics in *Film Culture* and the *Village Voice*. Mekas’ *Film Culture* had become the quasiofficial magazine of experimental filmmaking—setting critics like Ken Kellman, Parker Tyler, P. Adams Sitney and others on the underground in a serious attempt to examine and exonerate its works. In a deliberate effort to establish the

<sup>41</sup> Clifford Terry, “Creative Films Get Critical Debut” *Chicago Tribune*, (27 February 1966): Section 5, 13. The films screened that evening were all made by Ford Foundation grant winners: *Dance Chromatic* (Ed Emshwiller, 1959), *Science Friction* (Stan Vanderbeck, 1959) and *Breath-Death* (Stan Vanderbeck, 1964) *Stone Sonata* (Carmine D’Avino, 1962), *A Trip* (Carmine D’Avino, 1960), and *Motif* (Carmine D’Avino, ?), *Generation* (Hillary Harris, ?), *Seawards the Great Ships* (Hillary Harris, 1961), *Sunday* (Dan Drasin, 1961), *Bunker Hill*, 1956 (Students at the University of Southern California, 1956), *A Movie* (Bruce Conner, 1958), and *Fireworks* (Kenneth Anger, 1947). In addition to this program, the group screened *Little Stabs at Happiness* (Ken Jacobs, 1963) in 1967; in 1971, a series of films by Robert Nelson, possibly *Plastic Haircut* (1963), *Oh Dem Watermelons* (1965), *Hot Leatherette* (1967), *The Awful Backlash* (1967), *The Great Blondino* (1967), *The Off-Handed Jape* (1967), *War is Hell* (1968), and *Bleu Shut* (1970); in 1972, *Fuses* (Carolee Schneemann, 1965).

<sup>42</sup> Allen Ross, n.p. I haven’t been able to ascertain the title of this film.

<sup>43</sup> Camille Cook, letter to MCA director Jan der Marck, 20 June 1969, quoted in Stamets, n.p.

<sup>44</sup> Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 53

underground's high art provenance, Mekas called the work of Ron Rice, Jack Smith, Bob Fleischner, Ken Jacobs, Andy Warhol, and Kenneth Anger, "the Baudelairean Cinema," each working in the decadent Symbolist tradition associated with de Sade, Lautreamont, and Rimbaud. The films represented "a cinema of disengagement and a new freedom," making up "the real revolution in cinema today." They portrayed "a world of flowers of evil, of illuminations, of torn and tortured flesh; a poetry which is at once beautiful and terrible, good and evil, delicate and dirty."<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Susan Sontag compared Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* to Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, aligned it with noted cinematic classics like Eisteinstein's *Strike* and Bunuel's *Une Chien Andalou* and *L'Age D'Or* and declared it a "modern work of art."

*Flaming Creatures* is a lovely specimen of what currently, in one genre, goes by the flippant name of 'pop art.' Smith's film has the sloppiness, the arbitrariness, the looseness of pop art. It also has pop art's gaiety, its ingenuousness, its exhilarating freedom from moralism...Pop art lets in new wonderful and new mixtures of attitude, which would before have seemed contradictions. Thus, *Flaming Creatures* is a brilliant spoof on sex and at the same time full of the lyricism of erotic impulse."<sup>46</sup>

## The Festival Corporation

Despite the Aardvark's best efforts to draw crowds with its "adult" appeals (and repeated critical patronage by Roger Ebert, who wrote many reviews for Aardvark films over the years), the theater lost money from the start. Apparently, the crowd for their Monday-night series did not multiply by seven when films were shown by the week—it spread itself out over seven nights. "The Aardvark is a small operation," observed Ebert in 1968, "It caters to film buffs and hasn't yet attracted much of the general public, perhaps because of its obscurity. It plays classics, experimental films and an occasional first-run like the good, but little known, *Not on Your Life*. It is financially unable to bid for the big foreign films like *La Guerre est Finie*.<sup>47</sup> Steve Toushin agreed, "We showed 16mm art films and underground experimental films. We never made enough money to pay the rent or salaries unless we showed skin or gay themed films, or Bob Dylan's *Don't Look Back*.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Jonas Mekas, "The Baudelarian Revolution of American Cinema" *Village Voice* (2 May 1963), reprinted in *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 85.

<sup>46</sup> Susan Sontag, "Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*" *The Nation* (13 April 1964), reprinted in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1969): 230.

<sup>47</sup> Roger Ebert, "Why Those Films Don't Get Here," [PAGE?]

<sup>48</sup> Steven Toushin, "Bijou Chronicles," <http://www.steventoushin.com.bio.html>

As noted by Ebert and Toushin, the Aardvark faced the same expenses encountered by any other theater—film rentals, projectionists, staff, and general upkeep. One of the most pressing was their contract with the city’s projectionist union. Local 110 was famous for its contract, which mandated a 51-hour pay week for neighborhood theaters and obliged any house charging more than \$1.50 to have two men in the booth with salaries ranging from \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year. In addition to wages, theaters had to contribute an amount equal to 11 percent of the projectionist’s salary to a pension fund.<sup>49</sup> If theaters chose to eschew their services, the union was known to take violent action and was linked to repeated fire bombings, at least seven murders, and the Mafia. According to Begun, the threat of violence along with high projectionist wages and pension payments made the exhibition business in Chicago very different from the rest of the country: “A theater on the west coast can do very nicely on a gross of \$4,000 per week. In Chicago, you can’t stay open on \$4,000 per week.”<sup>50</sup>

By the spring of 1970, Aardvark was nearly \$48,000 in the hole and could no longer afford its daily expenses. Under pressure by the theater’s outside investors to find a profitable booking policy or shut down, Gonsky and Begun rented the theater to a man road-showing Matt Cimber’s *Man and Wife* (1969), a sexually-explicit “marriage manual” of “42 ways by a couple to save a marriage.”<sup>51</sup> According to Conroy, the film made more money in one weekend than the Aardvark had made in weeks and the two booked a straight porn slate to keep the theater open.<sup>52</sup> Toushin claims that the transformation from arty underground to explicit porn was much more gradual, remarking that the Aardvark and underground filmmaking in general deliberately blurred the distinctions between the two. “By 1969,” he claims, “50% of the films we were showing were just skin and gay themes. That year...I had my first obscenity arrest [for] Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures*. By 1970 explicit adult films exploded on the big screen in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles. I was now in the adult film business full time.”<sup>53</sup>

As described by Conroy, Gonsky and Begun “landed in an industry that was about to mushroom.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the Aardvark’s new profits allowed them to expand. By the mid-seventies, Gonsky and Begun owned and operated over half of all the pornographic houses in Chicago and Western Indiana. The two brought Toushin in as partner and incorporated their new empire under the Festival Theater Corporation. At its height, the Festival paid over 100 employees and operated ten theaters—including the Festival Theater (3914 N. Sheridan). The Three Penny (2424 N. Lincoln), the Bijou (1349 N. Wells), the Rialto (336 S. State), and the

<sup>49</sup> Dan Rottenberg, “Why Theatres Fail,” *Chicago Magazine*, (October / November 1975): 194.

<sup>50</sup> Begun, quoted in Conroy, 34.

<sup>51</sup> Advertising caption. *Chicago Tribune* (24 May 1970): Section 5, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Conroy, 31.

<sup>53</sup> Steven Toushin, “Bijou Chronicles,” <http://www.steventoushin.com/bio.html>

<sup>54</sup> Conroy, 31.

Follies (450 S. State) in Chicago, the Eden and Indiana Harbor in East Chicago, and the Hamilton and the Festival II in Indianapolis—a distribution company specializing in art-house and porn, a production company, a pornographic bookstore (Lady Chatterly's Bookstore), a parking lot, a health-food store, and a short-lived tourist attraction called “Electric Odyssey” in Old Town near the Aardvark.

Aardvark’s transition from underground and art house to pornography mirrors similar transformations in exhibition in Chicago and throughout the country. “By the 1970s much of [the art film] market seemed to have been driven out by an audience which, like earlier audiences, came to the movies solely for the novelty of seeing moving figures—in this case,” asserted *Chicago Magazine* reporter Dan Rottenberg, “moving black figures or moving genital figures. The arrival of X-rated pornographic films in the early 1970s had dried up much of the art audience, a portion of which had always attended the art films for their sex sequences rather than for their intellectual value.”<sup>55</sup> Filmmaker Palazzolo concurred, asserting that the X rating “killed underground films.” “Suddenly exhibitors brought in all these raunchy art films, and it turns out that the art meant nothing to audiences, double exposures meant nothing, weird soundtracks meant nothing. Audiences wanted nudity...I remember seeing people lined up around the block to see *I am Curious (Yellow)*. When that happened, we started getting five people a night to our underground film showings.”<sup>56</sup> According to Friedman, Louis Sher’s Art Theater chain explicitly switched from an art cinema policy to adult films when Sher discovered that it was the skin that was bringing the audiences in.<sup>57</sup> By the mid-seventies nearly all of Chicago’s loop theaters were screening pornography or blaxsploitation.<sup>58</sup> In his annual round up of Chicago movie theaters in 1974, Dave Kehr noted that the loop was “the province of action movies: blaxploitation films, Italian westerns, and anything starring Charles Bronson” and occasionally “some otherwise inaccessible foreign films under the guise of soft core porn.”<sup>59</sup> In 1975, he remarked that Chicago had a tendency to turn art houses into porn in their efforts to stay afloat. “Chicago has a way of turning new and hopeful art theaters into porn houses a few weeks after they open. There’s no raunch shortage in this town.”<sup>60</sup>

Toushik’s claim that the Aardvark gradually moved into pornography by mixing “skin and gay themes” with other kinds of underground films underscores the way the Aardvark and eventually the Festival Corporation attempted to straddle the divide between art and pornography and capitalize on the blurred distinctions between the two modes of production. While the Festival built an empire out of pornography, the group repeatedly attempted to open art house theaters with their earnings. In fact, they opened nearly every theater they acquired with a slate of art

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<sup>55</sup> Rottenberg, 177-8.

<sup>56</sup> Helbig, Section 1, 31.

<sup>57</sup> David Friedman, interview with Eric Schaeffer, quoted in Schaeffer, 337.

<sup>58</sup> Rottenberg, 177.

<sup>59</sup> Dave Kehr, “Reader’s Guide to Film: Filmgoing Takes a Little Cunning,” *Chicago Reader* (27 September 1974), 10.

<sup>60</sup> Dave Kehr, “Reader’s Guide to Movie Going,” *Chicago Reader* (5 September 1975), 40.

house films. They originally tried to turn the Festival—their first theatrical acquisition from porn profits--into an art house but gave up after six months of losses and began booking X-rated content. Similarly, they inaugurated a theater next to the Aardvark with Bo Widerberg's *Raven's End* and Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* but again failed to realize the profits necessary to keep the doors open. Describing one of the Festival's Indianapolis ventures, Toushin recalls that the organization opened their theater with a mix of provocative and high art international titles, using some of the same tactics they had employed advertising and booking programs at the Aardvark. “[In] Indianapolis, we had booked the first film *I am Curious Yellow*, a European Adult x-rated Film but not hardcore. We knew it was going to be a big money maker, which would help pay back remodeling costs. We were going to follow with the award winning foreign films *The Battle of Algiers* and *The Seventh Samurai*, if these types of films didn't succeed then we were going to show adult x-rated films.”<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, some of the underground films Gonsky and Begun played at the Aardvark also circulated in porn and grind houses—especially those geared towards gay audiences. Write Hoberman and Rosenbaum:

Throughout early 1969, [Warhol/Morrissey films] *Bike Boy*, *I, a Man*, and *Nude Restaurant* toured the provinces, playing midnight shows in theaters from Brooklyn to Berkely. In the absence of male skin flicks (which did not appear in any number until later that year), underground movies temporarily filled the breach. As late as the summer of 1969, *Flaming Creatures* (“At Last! The underground’s most underground movie!!!”) was showing in an “approved edited version” at a Los Angeles theater that catered to gay audiences. Other offices that summer included Warhol’s *My Hustler* and *B.J. [Blow Job]* (“Call theater for title”) Anger’s *Scorpio Rising*, as well as the anonymous *Nudist Beach Boy Surfers*).<sup>62</sup>

While Gonsky, Begun, and Toushin were obviously entrepreneurs, their willingness to screen pornography also seems to derive from the counter-cultural stance they had developed screening underground films. The corporation hired a six-foot tall transvestite as its receptionist and attempted to make representatives of mainstream morality as uncomfortable as possible. In a posting on his years as the advertising director for the Corporation, Steven Hashimoto writes, “We loved it

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<sup>61</sup> Steve Touchin, “1970 Indianapolis—Sex and God,” *StevenTouchin.com* (September 2003) <http://www.steventoushin.com/New%20Pages/9-11-2003.html>

<sup>62</sup> Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 76. While I don’t have specific evidence, it is likely that the Festival recycled some of the same titles they played at the Aardvark as underground films when they acquired the gay-oriented Bijou. This certainly needs to be considered in more depth, however. Conroy notes that what appeared on the screen did not always have an effect on the draw—in fact, a predictable number of people showed up regardless of what was shown. For example, Corporation booked hetero porn at the Festival but drew a large gay cruising crowd and even hired a topless hostess for a while as a gimmick. “I always said we should build smaller theaters with bigger washrooms,” claimed one former porn house manager who worked at theaters where cruising for pickups was common. “Give the public what it wants.” Conroy, 33.

when the fire, police, or building department would drop by the office to serve summonses or make inspections. We always found some way to make them walk through the theater while a film was showing.”<sup>63</sup> The group took a similar approach towards their audiences. In a photograph taken shortly after the Aardvark began exhibiting porn, a greasy, bobbed-cut Begun stands next to a crudely hand-lettered sign stating “IF YOU WOULD BE OFFENDED BY SCENES OF NUDITY AND SEXUAL INTERCOURSE, DO NOT ENTER THE THEATRE. You must be a mature 18 or over. [X].”<sup>64</sup> The sign both advertises the screening’s content and dares the public to enter, creating a sense of provocation similar to that of the underground.

Indeed, many of the same people who turned out to underground films filled out the audiences of pornographic reels. In the ad for *Man and Wife*, Aardvark advertises a “student rate,” indicating the possibility of a young, educated audience—the same kind that attended underground and art films. In fact, Begun noted that students made up a large portion of their audience in the early years. “For a while on Saturday nights our crowd was mostly students and college couples. At the Festival we had a lot of Indians, because at the time there were a lot of them living in the neighborhood.”<sup>65</sup> In his 1976 round up of Chicago-area movie houses, Dave Kehr remarked that the Aardvark attracted “slumming New Town couples.”<sup>66</sup> And, critic Ruby Rich recalls that all the “cool” girls would accompany their boyfriends to porn theaters.<sup>67</sup> In some ways, pornography seemed to emulate the role the popular press had created for underground films five years earlier. With the release of *Deep Throat* and Ralph Blumenthal’s article on “pornochic,” hardcore became a fashionable, albeit scandalous entertainment. “Once it broke in the society columns,” remarked *Variety* critic Addison Verrill to Blumenthal, “it was OK to go.”<sup>68</sup>

## The Midwest Film Center

While the Festival Corporation quickly expanded into the largest purveyor of pornography in the Chicago area, Camille Cook expanded the Magic Lantern Series into a full-time theater. And, while the Festival turned to the most profitable product—pornography—to pay its staff and investors, Cook sought out support from local and national institutions for her venture. Cook hoped to turn her series into a full-time theater devoted to the understanding of cinema as art. Inspired by

<sup>63</sup> Hashimoto, [http://findusat309.com/trench/2004/T\\_9\\_19\\_04.html](http://findusat309.com/trench/2004/T_9_19_04.html)

<sup>64</sup> *Chicago Sun-Times* (22 September 1976), 4.

<sup>65</sup> Jeff Begun, quoted in Conroy, 31.

<sup>66</sup> Dave Kehr, “Reader’s Guide to Chicago Moviegoing: Focusing on Film.” *Chicago Reader* (1 October 1976): 28.

<sup>67</sup> Rich, 21.

<sup>68</sup> Ralph Blumenthal, “Pornochic,” *New York Times Magazine* (21 January 1973): 30.

the newly established Pacific Film Archives, which had modeled itself after the venerable Cinematheque Française (whose programs had inspired the ground-breaking and canon-forming criticism at the *Cahiers du Cinema*) she approached the organization's founder, Shelden Renan, for advice. Renan, a film critic and scholar (and author of *Underground Cinema*), had been tapped to serve on the advisory panel for the National Endowment of the Arts inaugural program in Public Media and informed her that her vision was compatible with the Endowment's. "The National Endowment for the Arts was making grants for regional film centers," she recalled in a recent interview. "The director of the Pacific Film Archive...called me and said this money was available. But it had to be organized through a major institution."<sup>69</sup>

In order to ensure the soundness of her NEA application, Cook left the four-year-old Museum of Contemporary Art to secure the backing of a more established and prestigious organization. She originally approached the Chicago Art Institute, which turned her down, but eventually secured the support of the School of the Art Institute, which made space for her operation in one of their new buildings. The NEA awarded Cook \$12,000 and she was able to open the Midwest Film Center in January of 1973. Screenings took place twice a week in the Art Institute's Fullerton Auditorium and tickets were a dollar or \$15 for a season pass.

In an article representative of the kind of institutional and media support Cook worked to obtain, Gene Siskel announced the Center's opening and applauded Cook's vision, encouraging the city to support the new venue: "This article is dedicated to the hundreds of persons who have stopped me in movie theaters, dinner parties, baseball games, and lecture halls and complained that Chicago is a cinematic hick town, that they can never find any good art films...Your problems are over." The Midwest Film Center at the School of the Art Institute, he wrote, "will concentrate on films that make adventurous use of the medium and, consequently, have little commercial viability...This is a needed and ambitious project, and it needs your help if it is to succeed."<sup>70</sup>

Cook's transformation of the Magic Lantern Film Society into the Midwest Film Center inaugurated a new level of institutional support for the organization. While Cook had always utilized the financial and physical resources of other establishments, she now turned to private foundations and government sources for the majority of her operating costs. After securing money from the NEA, Cook turned to the newly formed Illinois Arts Council and Chicago city grants for additional funding. The establishment the Illinois Arts Council in 1967, and various programs consolidated under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) in 1973, provided the financial support she was looking for.

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<sup>69</sup> Cook, quoted in McGavin, [http://www.chicagoreader.com/hottype/2000/000714\\_1.html](http://www.chicagoreader.com/hottype/2000/000714_1.html)

<sup>70</sup> Gene Siskel quoted in McGavin,

In Chicago, the Mayor's office channeled a portion of CETA funds—designed to underwrite community-based job-training for the “demonstrably disadvantaged”—directly to a number of Chicago artists working in arts organizations. Many organizations utilized the grant to underwrite necessary staff positions. For example, Chicago Filmmakers director Brenda Webb remembers going to the unemployment office to apply for a position for which Filmmakers had designed for her. “Basically, we tried to work the system....I had to demonstrate that I was unemployed and then attempt to guide whoever was working there toward the position—telling them I was a filmmaker and asking if there was an opening anywhere.”<sup>71</sup> Cook utilized a similar grant from the Illinois Arts Council to hire future film critic Ruby Rich as her assistant and eventually co-programmer.<sup>72</sup>

The Midwest Film Center was one of the first of what would become a network of non-profit regional media arts centers—including Berkley’s Pacific Film Archives, Minneapolis’ Film in the Cities and film programming at the Walker Art Center, and Denver’s Rocky Mountain Film Center—funded by the National Endowment’s Public Media program. Launched in 1971, the program was part of the Endowment’s general mandate to “encourage the widest possible distribution of the nation’s greatest cultural wealth,...strengthen our major cultural institutions so they can better serve the public,...[and] further the creative work of the nation’s finest artists and to preserve our significant cultural heritage.”<sup>73</sup> Specifically, the program was developed to fund the

production, research and development designed to improve the quality of arts programming on film, television, and radio; regional film centers for exhibition and information services; curriculum development; workshops and seminars aimed at improving the standards of film study in schools and colleges; and film preservation, coordinated by The American Film Institute and carried out through the archival work of the several national collections of film.<sup>74</sup>

Essentially, the NEA hoped to facilitate the creation of some of the best works on film and a network of institutions in which they could be properly exhibited and interpreted as representatives of the country’s most significant works of art.

Established in 1965, the NEA was modeled after funding organizations like the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations which had themselves established dual programs for the creation of “best” works and development of an arts management class to help distribute, market, and interpret works. Richard A. Peterson argues

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<sup>71</sup> Brenda Webb, interview with author (1 March 2002).

<sup>72</sup> Rich, 20.

<sup>73</sup> “Forward,” *National Endowment for the Arts, Annual Report Fiscal Year 1972* (Washington, DC: National Council on the Arts, 1972): 3.

<sup>74</sup> “Public Media Program,” *National Endowment for the Arts, Annual Report Fiscal Year 1972* (Washington, DC: National Council on the Arts, 1972): 20.

that the NEA was started in part to build on this work, helping to cure the “costs disease”—as the Rockefeller Foundation called it—of the arts by creating better management. “The professionalization of arts managers was one of the recommendations of [a 1965] Rockefeller Panel Report which...was influential in shaping the structure of the National Endowment for the Arts,” Peterson notes. And, “the need to upgrade the managerial skills of arts managers was a continuing theme [for the NEA] through the 1970s.”<sup>75</sup> Accordingly, programs like the Endowment’s Public Media were meant to professionalize and institutionalize the way certain kinds of films were viewed.

This effort to create appropriate settings for film screenings was due in part to the transformation of commercial movie sector. Rich argues that NEA and Illinois Arts Council funding was developed to guard against the kind of theater the Aardvark had become. In her book *Chick Flicks*, she writes:

The reason for the start of subsidized exhibition has long been forgotten. At that time, the art cinemas that had long provided European film and auteurist retros for a cineaste public were fast disappearing, as their dedicated and independent managers proved no match for the profits that would flow to property owners who converted their houses to pornography. How ironic that the freedoms won by late-sixties censorship victories in the courts and by lifestyle shifts coincided to produce an unintended result: the loss of choice in the marketplace of the silver screen as the commercial engine of porn usurped the traditional place of art. The NEA’s start-up of nonprofit screens was a crucial intervention that maintained a place for quality work in those dark years when theatrical releases were unimaginable for an independent filmmaker.<sup>76</sup>

While Rich certainly romanticizes the existence of an unadulterated art cinema before the pornographic explosion, her characterization of nonprofit screens as the bastions of independent cinematic art underscores the threat low-cultural pornographic theaters presented to the institutions of high culture. In order to stem the tide of increasingly fashionable yet morally suspect exhibition spaces—especially ones that screened various mixtures of pornography, art, and underground film as the Festival Corporation did—the NEA made money available to organizations committed to presenting their work as art.

While many NEA-funded media arts centers devoted their screens to independent cinema, government and foundational support inaugurated the Film

<sup>75</sup> Richard A. Peterson, “From Impresario to Arts Administrator: Formal Accountability in Nonprofit Cultural Organizations,” *Nonprofit Enterprise in the Arts: Studies in Mission and Constraint*, Paul DiMaggio, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 19. The influential Rockefeller Panel Report was “The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects,” published in 1965.

<sup>76</sup> Ruby Rich, 20.

Center's transition from a series dedicated to independent, underground, or "personal" cinema to a theater of international, revival and art house fare. In the theater's first publication, Cook announced that "personal cinema, also called experimental, avant-garde, or underground" would be limited to two nights a month, the rest of its slate devoted to international and political fare.<sup>77</sup> Not only would this allow the Center to expand its offerings, it would also allow Cook to reach a broader and hopefully larger audience—an essential indicator for establishing and verifying the Center's worthiness for foundational support. Several years later, when a graduate student from the School of the Art Institute approached Cook about screening a number of experimental "structural" films making the rounds in New York lofts and galleries as well as in the pages of *Film Culture* and *Art Forum*, Cook rebuffed his suggestions, arguing that the films would not attract a big enough audience.<sup>78</sup>

In order to expand the Film Center's audience and ensure government and foundation funding beyond its inaugural year, Cook needed to define the organization as a repository for accessible cinematic art. As she had with the Magic Lantern series, Cook continued to present the works screened at new Film Center as art, though now she also attempted to emphasize art's ability to entertain. In a 1974 article in the *Film Center Gazette*, Cook saluted Abraham Teitel, whose hugely popular World Playhouse was the first to bring foreign pictures to South Michigan Avenue. "Belated thanks to you, Mr. Teitel," the Gazette said, "we're showing the movies across the street now. We hope you approve."<sup>79</sup> A 1976 ad in Chicago's only art magazine, the *New Art Examiner*, described the Center as "the standard for excellence in film programming in Chicago. New and old films, vital and unusual, are presented in continuing series that explore the diverse traditional styles of filmmaking and support our belief that entertainment can also be art..."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> "There is a Pattern," *Film Center Gazette*, (December 1973), 11. Films from the Center's Summer 1975 slate include: *Pepe LeMoko* (Julien Duvivier, 1937), *Griffith: A Biograph Treasury*, *The Steel Animal* (Willy Zielke, 1935), *Happiness* (Aleksandr Medvedkin, 1932), *Fantomas* (Louis Feuillade, 1913), *A Simple Story* (Marcel Hanoun, 1958), *They Live By Night* (Nicholas Ray, 1947), *I'm a Stranger Here Myself* (David Helprin, Jr., 1974), *The Fireman's Ball* (Milos Foreman, 1968), *Who Does She Think She Is?* (Patricia Lewis Jaffe & Gaby Rodgers, 1973), *Never Give Up* (Ann Hershey, 1975), *Taking Off* (Milos Foreman, 1971), *Jane* (Richard Leacock & D.A. Pennebaker, 1965), *Letter to Jane* (Jean-Luc Godard & Jean-Paul Gorin, 1972), *Day of Wrath* (Carl Dreyer, 1943), *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932), *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943), *Flash Gordon: No 6, 7, 8* (Frederick Stephani, 1936), *Human, Too Human* (Louis Malle, 1973), *Return from Africa* (Alan Tanner, 1973), *An Infinite Tenderness* (Pierre Jallaud, 1973), *The Working Class Go To Heaven* (Elio Petri, 1972), *Greed* (Erich von Stroheim, 1923), *A Page of Madness* (Tehosuke Kinugasa, 1926).

<sup>78</sup> Allen Ross, n.p. The student who approached Cook was the filmmaker Bill Brand who eventually went on to found Filmgroup at N.A.M.E. Gallery / Chicago Filmmakers.

<sup>79</sup> "Belated Thanks..." *Film Center Gazette* (May 1974), 10, quoted in Stamets, n.p.

<sup>80</sup> *New Art Examiner*, January 1976: [PAGE?]

According to Cook, the Film Center's most dedicated audience consisted primarily of people who worked downtown and wanted to catch a movie before heading home. "From observation, I'd say most of our audience is between 30 and 65. And a high percentage work within three blocks of the place."<sup>81</sup> In order to reach this public, Cook attempted to program more accessible and popular work. In a 1976 interview, she asserted that her role at the Center was "probably more business brains. In line with that, I push for more popular series." "Ruby," on the other hand, "is responsible for the more artsy kind of series."<sup>82</sup>

For the Film Center, "popular" films were repertory titles like *White Zombie* and *Flash Gordon* or foreign films with name recognition. Noting this in a 1976 review, Dave Keher remarked that, "while [the Midwest Film Center] never actually live[s] up to that rather grandiose title, they do play a lot of films that would probably never have made it here otherwise. Their schedule comes straight from the pages of *Sight and Sound*, circa 1965, but what they lack in taste they generally make up for in volume."<sup>83</sup>

In addition to nostalgia and name recognition, the Center relied heavily on favorable reviews by local critics. Explained *Chicago Magazine*, "under terms of its film rental contracts, the center can't advertise. Only when the movie critics from the dailies favorably review a program—as they did when *Payday* was shown this past summer—can Cook expect a full house."<sup>84</sup> Gene Siskel concurred, describing a particular incident in which the papers helped ensure the Center an audience:

Take a film that's playing at the Art Institute, which does not have an ad in the paper because the Film Center does not have ads, and the name of the film is *Kes*, and the director is Ken Loach. No one who reads the paper looking for movies will know that *Kes* is even playing because there's no ad, they don't know who Ken Loach is, and they don't know what a *kes* is. If there ever was an information gap, it was with that film. However, when the four critics wrote article in praise of this film they had a turn-away audience on a Friday night at the Art Institute at 5:30 and 7:30 on a night when most people would want to be home.<sup>85</sup>

The Center's relationship with the press—especially the *Chicago Tribune*—was significant. Not only did Siskel repeatedly assure his readers that "not all of the films are obscure foreign subtitled things directed by men who wear dark

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<sup>81</sup> Camille Cook, quoted in Bridges, 187.

<sup>82</sup> Camille Cook, quoted in Bridges, 187.

<sup>83</sup> Dave Kehr, "Filmgoing Takes a Little Cunning: A Reader's Guide to Film," *The Chicago Reader*, (27 September 1974): Readers Guide 10.

<sup>84</sup> Bridges, 187.

<sup>85</sup> Gene Siskel quoted in John Conroy, "Our Critical Faculty: Gene Siskel," *Chicago Magazine*, (October / November 1975): 259.

glasses,” he also helped funnel money from the *Chicago Tribune* to the Center for programming.<sup>86</sup> In fact, the *Tribune* and Siskel himself actually helped put on the Center’s first women’s film festivals—Films By Women / Chicago ’74. As Rich puts it, “I was a curator-in-the-making who would never have presumed to stage a women’s film festival if not for a fortuitous phone call from the Chicago Tribune’s film critic, Gene Siskel, just back from two weeks of Army Reserve duty in Washington, D.C. While there, he’d checked out a women’s film festival and was staggered by what he saw.”<sup>87</sup> While the Film Center used the *Tribune* to reach an ever-larger audience, the paper used the Film Center to revamp its own image, hoping to redefine itself as the champion of the kind of cinematic art the Center screened. “With the *Tribune*’s help,” Rich recalls, “our outreach went beyond anything we could have imagined, for better or worse. We were being funded not by the paper’s editorial side (despite Siskel’s instigation) but by its marketing department, which, in a wonderful display of what has always made capitalism strong, saw us as its chance to change the paper’s stodgy Republican image and attract a new generation of readers, scoring a potential upset in the city’s eternal circulation wars.”<sup>88</sup> Not only had Cook successfully transformed her endeavor from a small series of experimental films struggling for institutional support into a full-time Film Center, the organization had also transformed into one of the city’s art institutions, taking its place among the guardians and interpreters of culture.

## Conclusion

The Festival’s pornographic empire came crashing down on September 21, 1976 when Paul Gonsky was found shot to death outside of the Aardvark. The papers wrote apologetic obituaries, distancing Gonsky from the content of his theaters and emphasizing that he had been forced into the sordid business of porn after attempting to bring culture to the backwaters of Chicago. The crime was linked variously to the mob, the projectionist Union, his partner Steven Toushin, and a ring of small-time criminals, but never solved. After Gonsky’s death the business deteriorated, theaters burned down, employees resigned, Begun moved to California, and Toushin turned the Bijou into a sex club.

Camille Cook left the Film Center in 1981 after Richard Pena became the director. According to Rich, the Center had grown too large for Cook to handle by

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<sup>86</sup> Bill Stamets, n.p. I have not been able to confirm this quote. I think the real quote may be “They consistently show movies that we don’t normally get elsewhere, not necessarily obscure films that will please not one, but films with popular appeal” best single force for movies in the city..the taste of the people who program it...is very, very good.” Gene Siskel, “Our Critical Faculty: Gene Siskel, interview by John Conroy, *Chicago Magazine*, (October / November 1975), 160.

<sup>87</sup> Rich, 33.

<sup>88</sup> Rich, 35.

1974, and as a result, her “business brains” and employee relationships had begun to deteriorate.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, the Center continued to build on the course Cook originated—continuing to define itself as a destination for accessible cinematic art. This can be seen most recently in the Center’s name change to the Gene Siskel Center, clearly associating the organization with the legacy of the popular critic. Many saw it as another move by the Center to appeal to an ever-broader public and attract money to its capital campaign.<sup>90</sup>

The trajectories of the Aardvark Cinematheque and the Magic Lantern Film Society reveal the underground’s dual appeals to both high and low culture. Begun, Gonsky, and Toushin attempted to define the Aardvark as a hub of counter-cultural activity, refining the house’s reputation for confrontational and scandalous cinema. In contrast, Cook attempted to distance her series from the more sundry qualities of the underground, defining the work she programmed as art and emphasizing her professional approach. As each series attempted to secure their futures, however, both abandoned underground filmmaking. Instead, each built on the rhetoric they had employed to sell underground films for their new endeavors. The Festival built on the sexually risqué and oppositional reputation Gonsky and Begun had developed at the Aardvark, while the Film Center continued to court established institutions by building on Cook’s efforts to define her programming selections as art.

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<sup>89</sup> Rich, 49.

<sup>90</sup> Michael Wilmington in McGavin, [http://www.chireader.com/hottype/2000/000714\\_2.html](http://www.chireader.com/hottype/2000/000714_2.html).